Part I

Qualitative Research in Criminology: History, Politics and Ethics
The Development of Qualitative Approaches to Criminological Research

Introduction

Qualitative research has a long and distinguished history in the social sciences, arising in part from dissatisfaction with quantitative approaches. The ethnographic studies conducted by the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s established the importance of qualitative research for the study of crime and deviance. In this chapter, a brief history is given of the origins of criminology and the development of the empirical research tradition within it. This provides a backdrop for exploring the growth of qualitative approaches to criminological research, and for pinpointing the pragmatic utility and methodological desirability of qualitative approaches for researching crime and criminal justice.

The origins of criminology and criminological research

There is considerable debate about how best to define criminology. For Garland (2002: 7) criminology is ‘a specific genre of discourse and inquiry about crime that has developed in the modern period and that can be distinguished from other ways of talking and thinking about criminal conduct’. Criminologists will no doubt be aware that virtually everyone has common sense knowledge about crime, and correspondingly many ideas about the causes of crime and the best ways to tackle it. However, what characterizes criminologists is that they subject these ideas to rigorous enquiry by conducting either quantitative or qualitative research. Defining criminology as a discipline with an emphasis on empirically grounded, scientific study, Garland
proposes that criminology grew out of a convergence between a governmental project and a Lombrosian project. The former signifies a series of empirical studies beginning in the eighteenth century that have sought to map patterns of crime and monitor the workings of the criminal justice system. Such work aims to ensure that justice is delivered effectively, efficiently and fairly. The latter project denotes a contrasting project, one based on the notion that it is possible to ‘spot the difference’ (Coleman and Norris, 2000: 26) between those who offend and those who do not using scientific means. This paved the way for a tradition of inquiry seeking to identify the causes of crime through empirical research, beginning with the use of quantitative methods but later supplemented by qualitative ones.

The legacy of this historical development can still be felt and produces continued tension within the discipline between policy-oriented criminological research, with its emphasis on the management and control of crime, and a theoretically-oriented search for the causes of crime. For Garland (2002) the combination of the two projects is sufficient if criminology is to continue to claim to be a useful and scientific state-sponsored academic discipline. While this aspect of his view is not widely challenged, the implication that classicism ‘becomes the criminology that never was’ (Coleman and Norris, 2000: 16), in the sense that it does fit Garland’s definition of criminology has been disputed. Others, for instance Hughes (1998), would argue that with the benefit of hindsight the Classical School is the first clearly identifiable school of criminology, distinctive because it marks a shift away from explaining crime in terms of religion or superstition. Even a cursory glance through the main texts available on criminological theory, both classic and contemporary, indicate at least implicit support for this view (Lilly et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 1973). The Classical School, a term used retrospectively to describe the work of philosophers such as Beccaria and Bentham, refers to late eighteenth century theorizing about crime which grew out of the Enlightenment project with its focus on reason. The classical approach to the study of crime was underpinned by the notion of rational action and free will. These notions were neither subjected to empirical testing nor had they been developed from exploratory research. Hence, they do not meet Garland’s definition of criminology. The debate presented here relates to the question: ‘is criminology a science? ’; a question that has also plagued closely related disciplines such as sociology. In relation to criminology, Coleman and Norris (2000: 176) argue this is a ‘difficult question that has taken up a lot of energy over the years, often to little effect’. Given our focus in this text on empirical research, we offer support for Garland’s position but note the earlier influences.

The debate outlined above is one of many that criminologists continue to have on fundamental issues. This is unsurprising in many respects. Criminology, as an academic subject, is held together by a substantive concern: crime (Walklate, 1998). Consequently, it is multi-disciplinary in character rather than being dominated by one discipline. For this reason, it is helpful to view criminology as a
‘meeting place’ for a wide range of disciplines including sociology, social policy, psychology and law among others. Individual criminologists frequently adhere more closely to one social science discipline than others. Hence, to understand fully what they are attempting to articulate, it is important to note the conceptual apparatus they are utilizing (Walklate, 1998). For instance, our own work draws heavily upon sociological concepts and theories, however, we have worked with colleagues from other disciplines. We would argue that this enriches our work but often after considerable discussion has taken place. As a consequence of the diverse theoretical frameworks upon which criminologists can draw, they frequently disagree with one another. Walklate (1998) argues that despite such disagreements there is some consensus (although we would suggest that it is a tenuous one) in that criminologists aspire to influence crime control policy. However, there is much less consensus around features of what constitutes the crime problem.

We will now explore the development of both quantitative and qualitative traditions within criminology, focusing predominantly on the latter but including the former because it provides a backdrop to understanding the emergence of qualitative techniques. We will attempt to locate the emergence and development of these traditions within their social and political context. Before moving on it is important to note that not all criminological research is empirical but takes a theoretical form. Both forms require different skills and training but it is not appropriate for a ‘pragmatic division of labour’ (Bottoms, 2000: 15) to be fully adopted. All empirical researchers need to acknowledge that theory is an essential element of the data collection and analysis process (see Chapter 8). Similarly theorists need to draw upon, and understand, empirical research as one means of testing the ability of their theoretical account to explain the social world.

**The quantitative tradition**

The quantitative tradition is closely allied to a theoretical perspective known as positivism, which has been adopted to study a wide range of social phenomenon. Researchers who adhere to this approach aim to explain crime and predict future patterns of criminal behaviour. Emulating the analysis by natural scientists of causal relationships, positivists are concerned with developing objective knowledge about how criminal behaviour was determined by either individual or social pathology. As Muncie (2001) notes, identifying the exact moment when positivist criminology became apparent is difficult but it is typically associated with the work of French and Belgian ‘moral’ statisticians in the 1820s. The publication of national crime statistics, beginning in France in 1827, provided these scholars with a dataset to be analysed. Quetelet’s (1842) work is well known. He was concerned with the propensity to commit crime, which he used to refer to the greater or lesser probability of committing a crime. The potential causes of crime he concerned himself with were the
influence of season, climate, sex and age. Based on his analysis of these variables, he concluded that crime patterns are regular and predictable, reaffirming his view that the methods of the natural sciences are wholly appropriate for understanding the causes of crime. For positivists such as Quetelet, the search for the causes of crime emphasized the role of social contexts external to the individual, thus the role of social, economic and environmental factors. Other important sociological positivist work includes Durkheim’s (1895) analysis of crime rates and the Chicago School studies of crime patterns within the city of Chicago (Shaw and McKay, 1942). All these studies made use of official crime data in the form of police statistics or court records.

Both positivism and the quantitative tradition have been subjected to fierce criticism, particularly since the 1960s. Critics have argued that it is highly dubious to translate statistical association into causality. Quantitative work in criminology continues to be conducted but no longer adheres to a narrow positivist research tradition. Instead, quantitative work seeks to understand the complexity of social behaviour through examining a wide range of factors (see for example, Hale, 1999). In addition, quantitative research techniques have also been used to explore the workings of the criminal justice system; for example, to identify whether there is evidence of discrimination in the courtroom (Hood, 1992). In the next chapter, we will discuss briefly how quantitative approaches have been widely used since 1997 to evaluate a battery of new criminal justice interventions under the Crime Reduction Programme.

The qualitative tradition

The qualitative tradition in criminology developed in the United States. It owes a great deal to the work of the Chicago School. This school made important contributions to criminological theory, namely through developing ‘social disorganisation’ theory and their ‘ecological model’ of the development of cities and patterns of crime within them (see Downes and Rock, 2003). While many aspects of their work, particularly, the ‘ecological model’ have been discredited, they left behind a tradition of linking urban social problems to crime and provided the inspiration for the development of environmental criminology. Some of this work was based on quantitative research but the Chicago School also bequeathed a tradition of conducting criminological research which was distinctive in that they used ethnographic techniques to explore groups on the margins of urban industrial society in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. They focused, in particular, on the ‘dispossessed, marginal and the strange’ (Brewer, 2000: 12), and included in the long list of Chicago School ethnographies (see Deegan, 2001) are studies of gangs, prostitution and homelessness.

Drawing their inspiration from developments within sociological theory, Chicago School researchers pursued innovative qualitative work making use of participant observation, life histories and documents. This work began to influence British criminologists in the 1960s (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed
discussion). The qualitative tradition is now firmly established in criminology. Part of the explanation for this is the growth of new theoretical perspectives, which are broadly compatible with qualitative approaches to criminological research. Positivism has been subjected to fierce criticism by advocates of symbolic interactionism. As a result, they turned their attention away from the causes of crime to explore the process by which crimes are created and social reactions to crime. Advocates of the interactionist position see the social world as a product of social interactions, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of crime and deviance. The basic principles of positivism were called into question as symbolic interactionists emphasized the importance of human agency, consciousness and meaning in social activity, and highlighted the plurality of norms and values relating to ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ behaviour. Symbolic interactionism inspired the development of the labelling perspective and the work of ‘deviancy theorists’ in the UK (discussed further in Chapter 6). Criminologists working within these theoretical frameworks were anti-statistical. While their work has been subjected to vehement criticism for paying insufficient attention to the exercise of power by feminists, Marxists and critical criminologists, these latter theoretical approaches have continued to support the use of qualitative methods.

Further chapters in this text will exemplify that the qualitative tradition is alive and well but continually faces threats to its health. We return to this discussion in the concluding chapter. For now we note that qualitative methods are used by researchers who are influenced by a wide range of theoretical perspectives. While we have demonstrated linkages between different theoretical traditions and the use of either qualitative and quantitative approaches, we hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter that the relationship between theory and research is not a straightforward one.

**Combining traditions**

While we have just presented quantitative and qualitative traditions within criminology separately, we are mindful of the dangers of too sharp a distinction between the two traditions. As Silverman (1998) argues, it is absurd to push too far the qualitative/quantitative distinction. For Silverman (1998), the qualitative/quantitative research dichotomy is acceptable as a pedagogical device to aid understanding of a complex topic but such dichotomies are dangerous because they tend to locate researchers in oppositional groups. For some criminological researchers this is not problematic because they adhere strictly to either qualitative or quantitative methodology. Our own position is that while we would identify ourselves as qualitative researchers we make use of quantitative measures where appropriate. This might take many forms. Firstly, it is possible to derive some quantitative data from techniques typically associated with the generation of qualitative data. It is feasible that a study involving
qualitative interviews will produce some basic quantitative data such as counts of interviewees who identified the same issues as important. Secondly, we might use the same data collection method such as the face-to-face interview to generate both qualitative and quantitative data by including a range of questions, some open-ended, others fixed-choice. Thirdly, we might use two different methods, one that will produce qualitative data (for example, focus groups) and another quantitative data (for example, structured observation).

The process of combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies is one aspect of triangulation. Triangulation can be defined simply as ‘the use of different methods of research, sources of data or types of data to address the same research question’ (Jupp, 2001: 308). For Hoyle (2000), the term shrouds in mystery straightforward and sensible means of looking at the social world and obfuscates the role of the social researcher. However the concept is widely used in a number of ways and these are defined in Table 1.1

TABLE 1.1 Forms of triangulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of triangulation</th>
<th>Alternative names (if any)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Data triangulation</td>
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<td>Collection of different types of data on the same topic (Jupp, 2001), using the same method or different methods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator triangulation</td>
<td>Researcher triangulation,</td>
<td>Collection of data by more than one researcher (Jupp, 2001)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>team triangulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method triangulation</td>
<td>Technique triangulation</td>
<td>Collection of data by different methods (Jupp, 2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical triangulation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Approaching data with multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995)</td>
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The term ‘triangulation’ was first used in the context of social research by Campbell and Fiske (1959) but was used more frequently following the publication of Webb et al.’s text on unobtrusive measures and social research in 1966. While Webb et al. are keen to point out that single measures are not ‘scientifically useless’ (1966: 174), they propound that ‘the most fertile search for validity comes from a combined set of different measures’ (1966: 174). Triangulation as a social science concept derives from a loose analogy with navigation and surveying (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The term was used in these professional fields to refer to the use of two or more landmarks to pinpoint a position more accurately than if one were used.

Applied to social research, arguments have been advanced for combining methods. The use of different methods can be an implicit or explicit decision. It may also be built in to the research strategy adopted. Brewer (2000) argues that combining methods is a routine feature of ethnographic research (see also
Chapter 6). Most research projects in the social sciences are in a general sense multi-method because alongside the main method of choice, subsidiary techniques are used. For example, conducting interviews in a prison will always involve some degree of observation of the social setting, which may impact on the research even if the data are not formally recorded or analysed. Similarly, a study relying mainly on participant observation within a youth centre for children at risk of offending is likely to begin with reading published documents about the centre, for instance bids for funding, annual reports and newspaper cuttings.

Numerous advantages are advanced in the literature to persuade researchers to adopt a multi-method approach, and the overarching theme is that combining methods increases the validity of the findings. Reflecting on his own criminological research career, Maguire (2000) argues for utilizing as many diverse sources of evidence as feasible to answer a research question. His rationale is that criminological research often involves working with information that is unreliable to varying extents. By bringing together different methods with their own blend of strengths and weaknesses, it is hoped that the weaknesses of one method can be countered by the strengths of the others. If the data gathered using the different methods offer similar conclusions, criminologists can be more confident that the conclusions offered are valid in the sense that they are plausible and credible. Similar arguments have been advanced by other criminologists (see for example King, 2000).

Denzin (1970) also advocates a strong case for triangulation, suggesting that this is the basic theme of his book entitled *The Research Act in Sociology*. He argues that his definition of each method implies a triangulated perspective. Denzin notes that the shifting nature of the social world and the biases that arise from the sociologist’s choice of theories, methods and observers provide difficulties that a researcher working in the natural sciences does not face. For Denzin, the solution is to recognize these difficulties and to use multiple strategies of triangulation (data, investigator, methodological and theoretical) as the preferred line of action. He suggests that triangulation is the key to overcoming intrinsic bias that stems from single method, single observer and single theory studies. Despite Denzin’s claim in the preface that he subscribes to a symbolic interactionist perspective, Silverman (1985) and May (2001) both highlight that Denzin’s prescriptions can be seen to mesh with the positivist desire to seek an ultimate ‘truth’ about the social world through cross-validation. In his later writings, Denzin (1990, 1994) no longer subscribes to his earlier view, favouring a more postmodern approach, which gives precedence to the subjective world-view of research subjects as the only reliable vantage point (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1993). Between the two extremes are calls for ‘reflexive triangulation’ (Hammersely and Atkinson, 1995; O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1993). This position encourages researchers to reflect upon the fact that social research is not conducted neutrally because researchers are part of the social world they are examining. It also reminds us that data
should not be treated at face value. This position is supportive of triangulation but adopts a healthy cynicism about its potential to increase validity and overcome bias.

Substantial support can be found for Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) argument that triangulation is not a simple test. Even if the findings do accord, this cannot be interpreted as ‘fact’. It is plausible that the results tally due to systematic or random error. For this reason, Hammersley and Atkinson suggest researchers need to avoid naïve optimism, and resist the temptation to assume that the aggregation of data from different sources will produce a more complete picture. For the majority of qualitative research studies, the goal of establishing ‘truth’ is actively rejected and multiple versions of reality are acknowledged. Consequently, differences between data are as significant and enlightening as similarities. As King (2000: 306) argues, it is incumbent on the researcher to report the conflicts as far as possible so that the reader may also try to form a judgement. We can add here that the role of the researcher is also to explain different findings.

Jupp’s (2001) suggestion that a much less bold and precise claim for triangulation can be made is helpful. He argues that different methods can be used to examine different aspects or dimensions of the same problem. Deliberately avoiding the term ‘triangulation’ and replacing it with ‘methodological pluralism’, Walklate advances a similar view:

Methodological pluralism … reflects a view of the research process which privileges neither quantitative nor qualitative techniques. It is a position which recognizes that different research techniques can uncover different layers of social reality and the role of the researcher is to look for confirmation and contradictions between those different layers of information (2000: 193).

We would like to advocate that researchers adopt a pragmatic and theoretically coherent approach to data collection, using appropriate methods to answer their research questions. The latter is important because researchers need to guard against the tendency to keep adding research techniques to their research design in an eclectic manner with the blind hope that it will produce a better thesis, report or other publication. A multi-method approach should only be pursued if it adds value to the study by enhancing understanding of the criminological issue of interest. Sometimes there may be little to be achieved by using different methods. As Jupp (2001) argues, some combinations of methods do not work well because they are founded on different assumptions about the nature of the social world and how it can be explained. Hence, combining methods does not automatically enhance validity. There are often pragmatic reasons for considering carefully whether a number of methods should be utilized. Maguire (2000: 138) shares the useful advice he received as a novice researcher: ‘the best tip is to imagine the final report and work backwards’. This should not be interpreted as a rigid approach to criminological research.
Instead it requires the researcher to consider what they have been asked to produce both in terms of focus and also length.

**Why conduct qualitative research on criminological topics?**

In the remainder of this chapter we provide some of the more common responses to the question above in order to persuade the reader to employ qualitative methods for future research projects.

*Because it provides a means of researching the ‘dark figure of crime’*

The ‘dark figure of crime’ can be defined as ‘the figure for unrecorded crime or undetected offenders, that is to say those not included in official statistics’ (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996: 146). There are other ways of collecting information on offences which do not appear in official crime statistics using quantitative techniques. Examples include the British Crime Survey, a victimization study involving interviews with 40,000 individuals aged 16 and over, and the Youth Lifestyles Survey, a self-report study of offending by almost 5,000 people aged between twelve and thirty (Flood-Page et al., 2000). Both datasets are collected from individuals living in private households in England and Wales.

Maguire (2002: 322) suggests that a ‘data explosion’ took place at the end of the twentieth century, and he goes further to argue that there is no longer a strong demand in late-modern societies for a crude general ‘barometer’ (2002: 361) of crime; a role traditionally fulfilled by official crime statistics. Criminologists are streetwise enough to realize that combining the different data sources will never reveal the full extent of the ‘dark figure of crime’. More realistically the hope is that combining different sets of quantitative data will build up a more complete understanding of the nature and extent of crime. However, as Coleman and Moynihan (1996) argue, there are some areas of criminological enquiry that are difficult to investigate using official data and survey methods. Hence, they suggest qualitative techniques could be used as a means of researching these areas. While these techniques need to be subjected to critical assessment, they should not be seen as a second best or a kind of fall-back to be employed where there is no quantitative data available. The use of qualitative techniques offer the opportunity to make a distinct contribution by elucidating the contexts in which offending takes place and the meanings attached to such behaviour.

One example of a form of crime, which is difficult to research using quantitative approaches, is white-collar crime. The definition of white-collar crime has been contentious since it was first coined by Sutherland (1949), and it remains a contested concept. We will not attempt to open up this debate here but instead direct the reader to Croall (2001) for an accessible introduction to this complex area of crime. As our working definition, we will adopt the
following ‘a heterogeneous group of offences committed by people of relatively high status or enjoying relatively high levels of trust, and made possible by their legitimate employment (Tombs and Whyte, 2001: 319–20)’.

It would be misleading to suggest that qualitative research on white-collar crime is unproblematic. Explanations as to why it is rarely detected, reported and prosecuted also serve as explanations for the lack of research in this area. They include the invisibility of such offences, their complex nature, the difficulties of identifying victims and the limited number of convicted individuals (Croall, 2001). Offences are hidden in occupational routines, and for this reason, often the only strategy researchers can employ is to conduct covert participant observation (see Chapters 3 and 4 for a discussion of the difficulties of covert research). One example of this form of research is Ditton’s (1977) study, which he describes as an ethnography of fiddling and pilferage. His setting was a medium-sized factory-production bakery. Croall (1998) remarks that researchers are rarely in a position to conduct overt research on the more serious forms of white-collar crime, especially within financial and commercial enterprises. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Levi’s (1981) study of long-firm fraud is described by Hobbs (2000: 171) as ‘as close to an ethnography of fraud as we are ever likely to get’. Levi conducted an intensive study of court records from the Old Bailey and Manchester Crown Court, interviewed credit controllers and businessmen, criminal justice and legal professionals, observed four trials at the Old Bailey and interviewed offenders within prison and the community. The latter aspect of the research was limited due to lack of time but also because the places frequented by white-collar offenders were beyond the budget of a doctoral student! Where access to the extent enjoyed by Levi has not been possible, qualitative researchers have been creative in their use of data sources. In addition to the sources of data used by Levi, qualitative researchers have also made use of individual case studies, investigative journalism, court reports, media report of cases and interviews with enforcers (Croall, 1998). For Hobbs (2000) multiple methods have become the norm, and researchers inevitably have to compromise. Given the difficulties of pursuing this line of research, as long as researchers remain cognizant of the limits of their data, they can help to illuminate the ‘dark figure of crime’.

We could have selected many other forms of crime as illustrative examples. The ‘dark figure of crime’ includes a wide range of behaviours including corporate, professional and organized crime. Only qualitative research has the potential to provide some insight into these crimes. This argument is advanced powerfully by Hobbs.

The covert, non-institutionalized base from which professional and organized crime operates favours the use of a range of largely interpretive approaches. Until gangsters, armed robbers, fraudsters and their ilk indicate their enthusiasm for questionnaires or large-scale social surveys, ethnographic research, life histories, oral histories, biographies, autobiographies and journalistic accounts will be at a premium. (1994: 442)
Matza (1969) first used the term ‘appreciative studies’ to refer to specific studies of deviant subcultures. This work was based on observation, sometimes involving participation, of the social world of deviants. In this respect the influence of symbolic interactionism is apparent. Criminologists now talk about appreciative criminology, referring to ‘an approach that seeks to understand and appreciate the social world from the point of view of the individual or category of individual, with particular reference to crime and deviance’ (Jupp, 2001: 12). In subsequent chapters of this volume we explore the ways in which different qualitative techniques can be employed to ‘appreciate’ the social world from the point of view of the offender, victim or criminal justice professional.

We provide one example here as an illustration. We hope to demonstrate why the choice of a qualitative approach was appropriate, and in so doing explore why a reliance on quantitative techniques was rejected.

There are numerous examples of criminological studies which have attempted to ‘appreciate’ the social world from the point of view of the criminal justice professional. Some of the more recent examples include studies by Silvestri (2003) and Crawley (2003) of police and prison officers respectively. It would be fair to say that some criminal justice professions have attracted more attention than others, with studies of police officers receiving the greatest consideration. There are a number of explanations for this imbalance, and the more obvious ones relate to the ease at which access can be negotiated, the appeal of the professional group and its work to criminological researchers and the priorities of funding bodies. Below is an example of a study that focused on probation practice, and is one of the few studies, which are concerned with the day-to-day work of practitioners in the Probation Service.

In Residential Work with Offenders, Wincup (2002) presents reflexive accounts of practice gathered from qualitative research in four bail hostels across England and Wales. The data gathered, predominantly from semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, are used to argue that the combination of working with a diverse, often needy and frequently risky, client group in a residential setting creates a unique blend of professional and personal anxieties. Wincup explores, solely from the viewpoint of hostel staff, the dilemmas which stem from working in an environment created to ‘advise, assist and befriend’ but progressively called upon to ‘confront, control and monitor’ (see Worrall, 1997 for a discussion of the changing nature of probation practice). Residential workers often experience a sense of isolation, receiving little training and perceive themselves as working on the periphery of the Probation Service. These reflexive accounts are located within their broader criminal justice context to allow discussion of the development of the ‘new penology’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992) with its emphasis on risk management, as well as ongoing concerns with diversity and the rise of the ‘what works?’ agenda. The accounts are also analysed...
in relation to contemporary criminological and sociological debates, particularly those relating to risk and gender. The text provides an insight into the everyday world of bail hostels, attempting to capture the rich and dynamic nature of residential work with offenders. It portrays a collective picture of the everyday, the banal and the commonplace, as well as the unique and the extraordinary. This could not have been achieved using quantitative approaches, although quantitative approaches might have been used to enhance the research (for example, to measure levels of stress).

Before moving on, a few brief comments need to be offered about appreciative research with offenders and victims. Zedner (2002) argues that victims now attract an unprecedented level of interest as a subject of criminology enquiry, and as a result, they are now a central focus of academic research. This is undoubtedly true but quantitative research on victims has been strongest, although some important qualitative work has been undertaken. This form of research has been largely done by feminists concerned with domestic violence, sexual violence and child abuse. Alongside the growing interest with victims, research on offenders continues. However, as Maguire (2002: 369) contends, too little recent research has focused on what he terms the ‘reality’ of criminal behaviour. This refers to ‘knowledge about offending behaviour itself, about how offenders understand and exploit criminal opportunities, about the interactions between offenders and how they perceive and respond to risk’ (2002:369). This discussion is developed further in Chapter 6 in relation to ethnographic research.

**Because it can complement quantitative research**

Qualitative research can complement quantitative research in a number of ways. Firstly, using qualitative approaches can help to inform the design of research instruments for the collection of quantitative data. King (2000) has used this strategy to conduct research in prisons. He suggests beginning with observation and records, then moving on to interviews and ending with questionnaires. The latter can be used to test the generality of the findings in the wider population. By administering questionnaires at the end of the fieldwork the response rate is also boosted as the researcher has established rapport with the research participants.

Secondly, qualitative studies can contribute to our understanding of the context in which crime occurs and criminal justice is administered through providing rich and detailed data to flesh out the bare skeleton provided by quantitative data (Coleman and Moynihan, 1996). Regardless of the size of the dataset or the number of variables contained within it, quantitative data can only represent abstractions from complex interactions, and as Bottomley and Pease (1986: 170) remind us ‘we should not allow statistics to make us forget the people behind the numbers’. A burglary offence, which appears in official crime statistics, is the outcome of negotiation processes between the victim
and/or witness and the police. It tells us nothing about decisions to report and record the crime. These decision-making processes can be researched using qualitative techniques such as semi-structured interviews with victims, witnesses and police officers or observation within a police station.

Thirdly, Mhlanga (2000) argues that statistical correlations in quantitative research require further explication using qualitative research techniques. Mhlanga’s study of the role of ethnic factors in decisions made by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to prosecute young offenders (Mhlanga, 1999) included an examination of case files of just over 6,000 offenders. These files were used to collect statistical data on a number of key variables including ethnic origin, gender, age and previous convictions. The data gathered were analysed using multivariate techniques, which control for other variables in order to identify the actual impact of ethnic factors. Noting that it is ‘always hazardous to move from correlation to explanation’ (Mhlanga, 2000: 414), and even more so when the topic of interest is a sensitive one, Mhlanga made a decision to present preliminary findings to CPS lawyers and managers to gain feedback. This took the form of a discussion group (he does not describe it as a focus group). The finding that the CPS were more likely to discontinue cases involving ethnic minority defendants was explored. The discussion group came up with two explanations for this: firstly, the police were ‘getting it wrong’ by charging ethnic minority defendants without sufficient evidence, and secondly, the CPS ‘could be using positive discrimination’ in favour of ethnic minority defendants (2000: 415). Mhlanga suggests that in any further research on this topic, it would be highly desirable to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with CPS lawyers.

Because it helps to inform the development of policies of crime control

There are multiple ways in which qualitative research, conducted either by researchers or practitioners, can assist the policy development process. Research can fulfil the role of evaluating current policy. It may also serve as an instrument for generating ideas for policy development. Finally, research may take the form of action research, which integrates the processes of research and action. In so doing, the typical model of academics or other researchers generating knowledge to be applied by practitioners is rejected. We will deal with these issues in turn.

In a chapter on qualitative programme evaluation, Greene (1994) notes that programme evaluations are typically oriented around macro policy issues of effectiveness and cost efficiency. Primary emphasis is placed on effectiveness in terms of quantifiable outcomes. Typical evaluation questions are thus: are desired outcomes attained and attributable to the programme? and is this programme the most efficient alternative? Where possible, quasi-experimental methods are utilized. However, there is growing interest in qualitative approaches to evaluation. Greene argues that the interpretive turn in the social
sciences has allowed approaches to develop, that promote pluralism in evaluation contexts, and a case study methodological orientation with an accompanying reliance on qualitative methods. These approaches seek to enhance contextualized understanding for stakeholders closest to the programme. For example, an interpretivist evaluation of an offending behaviour programme would focus on the perspectives of offenders, probation staff delivering the programme and assistant chief officers with responsibility for managing such programmes. The methods of choice would most likely be observation, interviews and documentary research.

Qualitative researchers vary in their attempts to influence crime policies but almost all research produces policy implications, even if they are not made explicit by the researcher. The extent to which the policy suggestions are taken on board by policy-makers has been the subject of considerable debate. We will not pursue this discussion now – apart from a short introduction to action research – but return to it in the next chapter, which focuses on the politics of criminological research. Action research first developed in the US and the UK in the late 1940s by social scientists who advocated closer ties between social theory and solving immediate social problems (Denscombe, 1998). It is typically associated with small-scale research studies. Action research can be perceived as a cyclical process. To begin the process, critical reflection on professional practice is required to identify a problem, which is then researched and the findings are translated into a plan for change. The plan is then implemented and evaluated. The ideal is that the process is ongoing with a rolling programme of research. The reality is that action research often involves discrete, one-off pieces of research (Denscombe, 1998). Action researchers are not limited to qualitative techniques but can use different techniques for data collection. However, qualitative methods are particularly suited to exploratory, small-scale studies.

Concluding comments

In this chapter we have explored, albeit briefly, the maturation of criminology as an academic discipline and we have drawn the reader’s attention to competing interpretations of the past. As Coleman and Norris (2000: 24) note in relation to criminology, ‘there has been some confusion over both its birthday and parentage’. Exploring this debate included an analysis of the emergence of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions within criminology. We focused predominantly, but not exclusively, on the growth of qualitative approaches to researching crime and criminal justice. While it may at first glance appear out of place to reflect on quantitative approaches in a text on qualitative research, we felt such reflections were needed for two reasons. Firstly, by exploring the strengths and weakness of quantitative approaches we can elucidate the reasons why qualitative approaches developed. Secondly,
researchers frequently use both quantitative and qualitative methods in their studies.

By combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, criminological researchers are avoiding ‘methodological pigeonholing’ (Bottoms, 2000: 21). This can be defined as ‘the tendency to assume that certain sorts of research methods ‘go with’ particular kinds of theoretical approach, to the exclusion of other kinds of data’ (2000: 21). Bottoms suggests that some qualitative researchers have set up mental barriers against the use of qualitative data, and similarly some quantitative researchers have been reluctant to make use of qualitative data. For Bottoms, these unjustifiable mental barriers have been some of the most unhelpful features of the British criminological landscape in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He proposes that these barriers are now being overcome, leading to a healthier approach to criminological research. We fully support his views.

The chapter ended with advancing arguments for using qualitative research techniques, and this includes relying solely on one qualitative method, combining different qualitative methods and utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This list of arguments is not exhaustive and undoubtedly counter arguments can be made. Completing the activities at the end of the chapter will help to add further arguments and develop responses to potential criticisms of qualitative approaches.

Exercises


3. Choose a qualitative study on any criminological topic and put yourself in the position of the author of the study. How would you justify the choice of a qualitative approach to the following: a potential funding body, a researcher with a reputation for being unsympathetic to qualitative approaches or a policy-maker?
Garland notes the history of criminology is probably too complex to be captured in a single text. Despite his concerns, his own essay (2002) provides an excellent and comprehensive overview:


In a chapter entitled ‘Crime, the criminal and criminology’, Coleman and Norris (2000) cover similar ground but in a far less detailed way. Nonetheless they give a flavour of the complex nature of the origins of criminology and its basic subject matter.

Triangulation is discussed, typically very briefly, in most of the introductory social research methods texts. For a more detailed discussion we recommend:


There are an abundance of texts on social research that outline clearly the perceived advantages of qualitative research:

- Bryman’s (1988a) Quantity and Quality in Social Research. This has become a classic text which offers a balanced discussion.